

Memo

**Questions Concerning the
Situation in Vietnam**

1 March 1968

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE SITUATION IN VIETNAM

I. THE COMMUNIST POSITION

How does Hanoi view the present phase of the war; for example, has Hanoi concluded that a protracted conflict is impossible and that it must gain victory this year or collapse?

1. Hanoi's strategy of revolutionary warfare in South

Vietnam has always embraced two propositions: to prepare for a protracted struggle and to seek victory in the shortest possible time. From the introduction of large US forces in 1965, through the summer of 1967 the emphasis was on the probability of a prolonged war of attrition. Some backing away from the protracted war theme became evident in captured documents and Hanoi's propaganda later in 1967. In our view the intensity of the Tet offensive and the exertions being made to sustain pressures confirms that Hanoi is now engaged in a major effort to achieve early and decisive results. Yet the Communists probably have no rigid timetable. They apparently have high hopes of achieving their objectives this year, but they will preserve considerable tactical flexibility.

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2. It is still not altogether clear why the Vietnamese Communists chose this course of action at this time. They certainly were not desperate or fearful of early collapse. A reconsideration of their capabilities to succeed in a long war may have been a contributing factor. And they probably regarded the balance of forces as sufficiently favorable to warrant a major and widespread offensive. The fact of Presidential elections in the US may have influenced their decision, and, of course, the tactical advantage of the Tet truce played a role in the immediate timing. In any case, it does not appear that they undertook the present offensive because they had concluded that protracted conflict was no longer feasible for them.

What are the capabilities of the NVA/VC forces to sustain their present offensive, and, if they choose to, continue a prolonged war thereafter?

3. There is no doubt that the Communists have already paid a high price in the present offensive phase. They have not only lost manpower, but also quality resources such as the special units employed in the Tet attacks. Nevertheless, prior to Tet there was apparently a strenuous drive to bring units up to strength with new recruits and upgraded guerrillas. Complete

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guerrilla units also were merged with local forces to form larger elements. Infiltration of replacements and units from the North has probably been heavier than previously believed. A part of the Main Forces have been withheld from major combat. Finally, an intensive effort to raise new levies is underway in the rural areas, where the Communists now enjoy fuller access. Thus, it is conceivable that the enemy's gross strength is not significantly lower now than it was in the latter part of 1967.

4. The Communist supply position might be a factor limiting combat capabilities in the next few months. Many forces are now deployed away from their bases at the end of longer lines of supply. Expenditures of ammunition and losses of equipment have been relatively high. These factors will be offset in some degree by the extraordinary stockpiling that evidently took place before Tet and by the increased availability of manpower in the countryside which will permit the continued portering of military supplies and food to VC/NVA forces.

5. While not strictly a matter of physical capability, the Communist position is much enhanced, for the time being at least, by their possession of the strategic initiative. Within limits this permits them to choose the time and place of combat and to

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keep US/ARVN forces pinned down and dispersed in static defense of many potential targets.

6. Accordingly, we believe that the NVA/VC forces have the capability to sustain a relatively high level of combat and occasionally to intensify it over the next several months, including rocket and mortar attacks on urban areas and military installations, major battles with US forces and assaults on selected cities. At the same time, the Communists will have resources to consolidate their hold on formerly pacified and contested areas.

7. It is conceivable that the Communists regard the present campaign as so critical to the ultimate outcome of the war that they will commit their full resources to a maximum effort in the near term, even at risk of very high losses. But it is far more likely that they probably will not use their resources in such a reckless manner as to deny themselves the possibility of continuing the struggle well beyond the next several months.

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What is the Communist attitude toward negotiations: in particular how would Hanoi deal with an unconditional cessation of US bombing of NVN and what would be its terms for a settlement?

8. The Communists probably still expect the war to end eventually in some form of negotiations. Since they hope the present military effort will be decisive in destroying the GVN and ARVN, they are not likely to give any serious consideration to negotiations until this campaign has progressed far enough for its results to be fairly clear.

9. If, however, the US ceased the bombing of North Vietnam in the near future, Hanoi would probably respond more or less as indicated in its most recent statements. It would begin talks fairly soon, would accept a fairly wide ranging exploration of issues, but would not moderate its terms for a final settlement or stop fighting in the South.

10. In any talks, Communist terms would involve the establishment of a new "coalition" government, which would in fact if not in appearance be under the domination of the Communists. Secondly, they would insist on a guaranteed withdrawal of US forces within some precisely defined period. Their attitude toward other issues would be dictated by the degree of progress in achieving these two primary objectives, and the military-political situation then obtaining in South Vietnam.

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11. Cessation of bombing and opening of negotiations without significant Communist concessions would be deeply disturbing to the Saigon government. There would be a real risk that the Thieu-Ky regime would collapse, and this would in fact be part of Hanoi's calculation in accepting negotiations.

THE OUTLOOK

What is the likely course of events in South Vietnam over the next 10 months, assuming no change in US policy or force levels?

12. In the assumed circumstances a total military victory by the Allies or the Communists is highly unlikely in the next 10 months. It is manifestly impossible for the Communists to drive US forces out of the country. It is equally out of the question for US/GVN forces to clear South Vietnam of Communist forces. It is possible, however, that the overall situation in this period will take a decisive turn.

13. We think it unlikely that this turn could be in the US/GVN favor. To be sure, Communist forces are now exposed to aggressive counteraction, their supply lines are extended, and some base areas may be vulnerable. Morale may be poor in some of the units which have suffered heavy losses. But we see no

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evidence yet that the GVN/ARVN will be inspired to seize the initiative, go over to the attack, exploit the Communist vulnerabilities, and quickly regain the rural areas. We doubt they have the will and capability to make the effort.

14. Far more likely is an erosion of the ARVN's morale and effectiveness. We do not believe that the GVN will collapse, or that the ARVN will totally disintegrate. But there is a fairly good chance that Communist pressures will result in a serious weakening of the GVN/ARVN apparatus and an end to its effective functioning in parts of the country. In these circumstances, virtually the entire burden of the war would fall on US forces.

15. The Communists too will be weakened by further offensive efforts. Losses will be heavy, combat effectiveness will be lowered, and morale will be damaged by the failure to achieve a complete victory. Even though their situation vis-a-vis the ARVN will be strong, their forces will probably not be in a position to register decisive advances unless they radically escalate the war by an all-out invasion.

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16. In sum, there is a high risk that both the ARVN and GVN will be seriously weakened in the next months, and perhaps decisively so. Our best estimate is that in the assumed circumstances the overall situation 10 months hence will be no better than a standoff.

REACTIONS TO US COURSES OF ACTION

What is the likely NVA/VC strategy over the next 10 months if US forces are increased by 50,000, by 100,000, or by 200,000?

17. We would expect the Communists to continue the war. They still have resources available in North Vietnam and within South Vietnam to increase their troop strength. Their strong logistical effort and their ability to organize and exploit the people under their control in the South enabled them to counter US increases by smaller increases of their own. Over a ten-month period the Communists would probably be able to introduce sufficient new units into the South to offset the US maneuver battalion increments of the various force levels given above.

18. We cannot foresee the outcome of future combat resulting from the increase in US forces. The Communists would probably

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have to modify their current tactics, especially if the US increments were large enough to permit the formation of a strategic reserve as well as providing for the partial relief of the ARVN. In some places, they would retreat from the urban areas, trying to hold as much as possible of the countryside.

19. The prospect of heavy US reinforcements might persuade Hanoi to gamble on an all-out invasion from the North to seize Northern I Corps before reinforcements could be committed. It is also possible that the Communists would greatly expend their military pressures in Laos. The purpose of such a move would be to draw off US forces from South Vietnam, and to indicate that, unless the war was ended, the US faced a continued expansion of its commitment.

20. We would not expect the addition of any given number of US troops to change the policy or attitude of the USSR or China. Both would be willing to increase assistance in weaponry and Peking would offer more manpower for North Vietnam. Both would be concerned that the US would still be frustrated and would eventually be led to invade North Vietnam. But neither China nor the USSR would be likely to enter the war in response

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to a US buildup, and neither would be likely to take drastic diversionary moves outside of Vietnam.

21. The general international climate would certainly worsen for the US. There would be greater apprehension that the war in Vietnam would inevitably expand to the point of a US conflict with China, and perhaps even with the USSR. Many countries would blame the US for not trying to negotiate with Hanoi. International pressures for an end to the fighting would increase. At the same time, some US allies in Asia would be relieved that the US chose to reinforce rather than accept an unfavorable political settlement.

What is the likely Communist reaction to a change in US strategy toward greater control over population centers, with or without increased forces?

22. In general the Communists would view this move as a success for their strategy. Their tactical response in such circumstances would depend mainly on the nature of US enclaves. If these were fairly large and embraced much of the outlying countryside, the Communists would believe them to be porous enough to infiltrate and harass, much as they are doing now. If the defensive perimeters were fairly solid, however, the

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Communists would not try to overrun them in frontal assaults. Instead, they would concentrate for a time on consolidating the countryside and isolating the various defended enclaves, in particular interdicting supply lines and forcing the US to undertake expensive supply movements from out of country.

A Communist-controlled regime with a "coalition" facade would be set up in "liberated" areas and attempts at terrorist activity inside the enclaves would be undertaken. Hanoi would hope that a combination of military and political pressure, together with the dim prospect for achievement of the original US aims in the Vietnam struggle, would eventually persuade the US to extricate itself through negotiations.

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